



STANSTED MOUNTFITCHET

PARISH COUNCIL

GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Adopted by the Council: 29th January 2020

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Adopted by the Council: 25th May 2022

GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice for the Parish Councillors in their dealings with the public. This policy applies to all communications with the press and public, but it also involves the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. The Policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Parish Council website
- Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- Parish Council Emails

The principles of the Policy apply to Parish Councillors, Council staff **and volunteers**. It is also intended to be guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration. Breaches of this policy by Councillors will be managed informally where possible or through the Code of Conduct and breaches by Staff will be managed through the Disciplinary Procedure.

The use of social media should not predict or replace existing or planned forms of communication by the Parish Council. The Parish Council website/**Facebook page and other forms of publicity may be used** to enhance communication.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way as other written or verbal communication. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What you write is permanent.

Councillors should be mindful that they may not be aware of the full context and detail of issues raised by others on social media and are required to familiarise themselves with the facts by contacting the office prior to commenting whenever reasonably possible. Office staff will respond to posts, if appropriate, the next working day.

In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using their website for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters, see further notes below.

Parish Council Social Media Policy

The Council will appoint the Clerk as the Moderator. The Moderator **may delegate responsibility to other staff members to post but will be responsible for** monitoring of the content ensuring that it complies with the social media policy. The Moderator will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory, libellous, **offensive or personal** nature. Such posts will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e Facebook) and also the Council. **Where possible, screenshots of such posts will be saved as evidence for future reference if required.**

The Council will appoint a nominated “Webmaster” to maintain and update the Parish Council website.

The social media may be used :

- To post [agendas](#), minutes and dates of meetings
- To advertise events and activities
- To share good news stories [linked website or press page](#)
- To advertise vacancies
- To Re-Tweet or ‘share’ information from partners i.e Police, Library and Health etc
- To announce new information
- To post or share information from other parish-related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g Schools, sports clubs and community groups.*
- To refer resident queries to the [office](#)

Facebook [may](#) be used to support the website information above.

Emails will be [the primary vehicle](#) used to distribute information on Council business [to councillors](#).

[*The Parish Council partners with other community groups in a variety of ways. This may be through financial contributions, permission to use our facilities or because the Parish Council is represented through membership of the group or by attendance at an event. In these situations, it is expected that the partner organisation will promote their events through social media/flyers/The Link magazine. The Parish Council may publicise the aspect of its own involvement as appropriate.](#)

Councillors and Media

Individual Parish Councillors cannot speak for the Council unless explicitly authorised by a resolution made in Council. Councillors may speak as individual residents, but care must be taken to ensure that a reasonable person could not assume that they are speaking on behalf of the Council. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address.

Guidance when using social media (including email)

- All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and ensure that the security settings are in place

When participating in any online [communication, councillors and staff must:](#)

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
- Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council [and clarify in which capacity you are writing e.g resident/councillor.](#)
- Never make false or misleading statements.
- not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. All Parish Councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council.
- Not bring the Council into disrepute or [publish material](#) contrary to the Council’s Code of Conduct or any other Policies, [Laws or Regulations.](#)
- Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or “loud”. Use sentence case format, not capital letters [and do not](#) write in red to emphasis points.

- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that are clearly offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or beliefs should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
- Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites **must** be sought from the person or organisation in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- Respect the privacy of other Councillors and residents.
- Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, see below libel and copyright.
- **Never reveal matters of a confidential nature, or disclose fees, payments or information relating to commercial arrangements, offers to tender or staff employment.**
- **The Parish Council office has as communications strategy for regular sharing of information, eg The Link on a monthly basis and Social Media for day to day interaction with parishioners. Our Communications Officer regularly receives information from numerous sources and will post on social media if it is considered appropriate. In order to maintain a collegiate approach, councillors are encouraged to share and re-post information posted by the office rather than post items individually.**
- Councillors should note that not all communications require a response.
- There **may** not be an immediate response to communications as:
 - a) **it may be out of staff working hours and/or**
 - b) **they may need to be discussed by the Parish Council and a response agreed by the Parish Council.**
- The Parish Clerk will be responsible for all final published responses from the parish council.
- If the Clerk feels unable to answer a post for example of a contentious nature, this shall be referred to the Council, or if an urgent response is required, the Clerk will confer with the Chairman or Vice-Chairman before posting. The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact.
- Some communications from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a Parish Council meeting. When this is necessary the item will be placed on the next available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meetings.
- The Moderator will remove any negative posts which may contain personal and inflammatory remarks, libellous or defamatory information without further comment or notification.
- Spell and grammar check everything
- Correct any error promptly

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Taken from the national Code of Conduct for Councillors

Additional Guidance - 12 Blogging and Social Networking

A blog is a frequently updated individual website discussing subjects ranging from the personal to the political. Social networking is an online method of sharing information, opinions, photographs etc with contacts and associates. Social networking sites include Facebook, Twitter and Myspace.

Blogging or social networking can be sponsored by a council, carried out by a member as an individual or carried out anonymously.

Use of online media to promote a member's work as a councillor or through a council website is likely to be regarded as conducting the business of the authority and would therefore engage the Code of Conduct. Contents of private, non-political blogs are less likely to engage the Code of Conduct. It is the contents of a blog and not the circumstances surrounding its creation that would determine whether or not its contents fall under the Code of Conduct. A disclaimer in a private blog which says that any comments are not made in an official capacity will not necessarily prevent breaches of Code of Conduct being found. Anonymous blogging may engage the Code of Conduct but it will be necessary to demonstrate that a member was indeed the author of the blog.

When blogging or using social networking members should consider whether the Code of Conduct is engaged by reference to paragraph 2 of the Code. Factors which ought to be considered in reaching this decision are:

- How well known or how high a profile the member is. The higher the profile a member has the more likely it is that they would be seen to be acting in an official capacity.
- The privacy settings on a member's blog or social networking site. A blog with wide access may lead constituents to assume that a member is acting as their representative thereby making it more likely that the Code of Conduct is engaged.
- The profile on the member's blog or social networking site. A clear statement that the blog is political or personal will be of assistance although it may be possible in a personal blog to give the impression that a member is acting as such even though the blog states otherwise. Members may not discuss council business on a personal blog and/or make offensive remarks about others who are linked to the council and then claim to be doing so in a private capacity.

When using a blog or social networking site, members should have regard to the following provisions of the Code:

- 3.1 The requirement to treat others with respect.
- 3.3.2 Bullying.
- 3.3.5 Restriction on disclosure of confidential information.
- 3.3.7 Not to engage in conduct which could reasonably be regarded as bringing the council or the office of councillor into disrepute.
- 3.4 The requirement to use council resources properly.

Members should also consider other online activity where the Code of Conduct may apply. For example, if a member places content on another site (e.g forum posts or another person's social networking site). A member could give the impression that they are acting as such if they identify themselves as being a councillor or if they put content on these sites which could only have been obtained by a member of the council.

Any member of the Council who does not comply with this policy will be contacted in the first instance by the Clerk. Continued non-compliance may result in a referral under the Code of Conduct.

The policy will be reviewed annually.